

Inaccessible Amenities: The Effects of Gentrification on Voter Suppression in Austin

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The current tenants of the Mueller neighborhood in the city of Austin find themselves living in a diverse community, full of multiple cultures and sexualities, comparably as safe as the suburban areas where they previously resided (Cabrera, 2018). However, this “diversity” comes at a high cost to the previous incumbents of this area, many of whom were low-income Black individuals who also once regarded this space as their community. In solidarity with the historic trend of major cities, Austin, Texas, has an extensive past of segregating marginalized identities. Making the best of their situation and the space they were allotted, these segregated groups created communities with their own cultural and economic enclaves (Philpot & White, 2010). Nevertheless, as this issue of segregation has evolved to current-day gentrification tactics, and with people of color (POC) being disproportionately affected by gentrification, there is an increasing concern about the heightened suppression of voters of color (VOC) within the city.

In order to properly analyze this claim, research into the historical trends of segregation in Austin was examined in tandem with the institutionally implemented incentives, such as redlining and physical structures, that led to the current population distribution of POC in the city. Afterwards, an investigation into the current climate was made regarding present-day gentrification fronts, polling locations, population distributions, and other tactics encouraging voter suppression. Utilizing the resources provided by the Austin City Council, Travis County Clerk, and many other articles to determine the current demographics and sociopolitical environments in the city, gentrification is predicted to negatively impact VOC while having no particular impact upon new residents.

Literature Review

To better understand the effects of segregation and gentrification in general, the terms must first be defined to recognize the differing perspectives on the issues. Racial segregation is a historically institutionalized form of discrimination made to separate POC from rich white individuals in America in as many avenues as possible (McGrew, 1997). Through the intertwined use of legal measures with social pressures, such as redlining and Jim Crow laws, communities of color were oftentimes required to concentrate in specific areas of cities, resulting in an overall inequitable allocation of resources to these individuals.

This trend is seemingly revamped and glorified in the system of gentrification. Gentrification is a change in the population of an area to be a higher socioeconomic class when accompanied with a change in the physical infrastructure of the area, leading to the subsequent displacement of the original occupants due to a heightened cost of living and societal pressure (Ghaffari, 2018). While there are definitely individuals who support the idea of updated amenities and residence buildings, especially when the opportunity is most in their favor, this comes at a high cost for the already established communities, many of which were segregated into these areas only a few decades prior (WNJP Radio, 2016).

Partnered with the displacement of incumbents comes an inherently lessened concentration of POC in these spaces, effectively cracking their vote into numerous white suburban areas and lowering the ability for communal mobilization within historically relevant cultural sites, such as churches and barber shops (Harriot, 2017). This would essentially double dip in the practical use of diluting VOC power as many candidates who otherwise depend on their vote would be less capable to accessibly acquire community action, making them more likely to lose overall. Better explained by Knotts & Haspel, who researched the gentrification of

neighborhoods in Atlanta, “Organizations in a neighborhood also have a positive impact on individuals’ turnout decisions, showing nearly an 11 percentage point differential between the strongest neighborhood and a neighborhood with no organizations,” meaning that the lack of these communal spaces for POC to congregate might only lessen their voting power (2006). Their study also found that while gentrification on the neighborhood level does not seem to have any impact on voter turnout for new residents, there is a significantly negative impact on voter turnout associated with gentrification for longstanding residents of Atlanta.

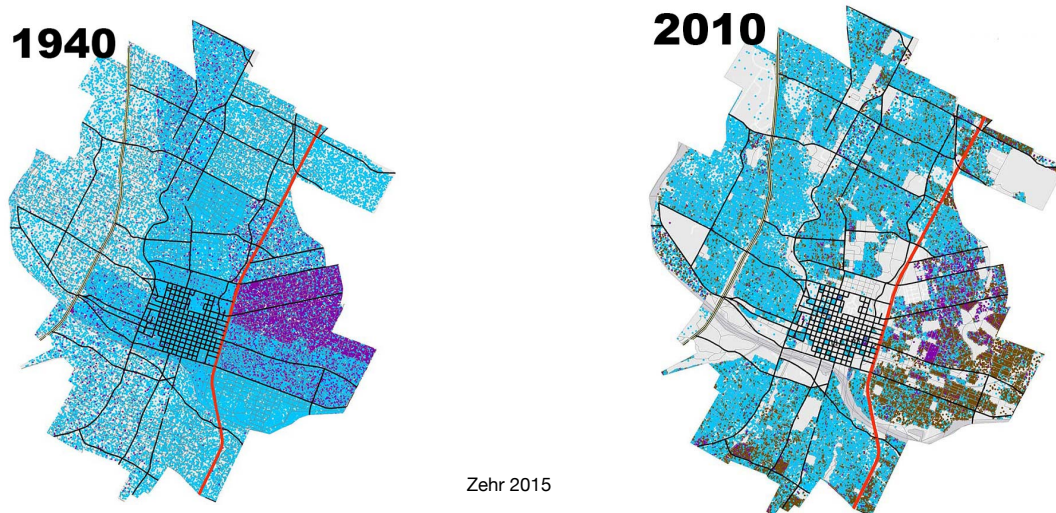
Segregation in Austin

Transferring all of this to the history of the city of Austin, there was a Medium article written by Chao Xiong in 2018 regarding the foundation of segregation for the city in our current-day. The article starts by identifying the amenities that many individuals in Austin tend to enjoy, showcasing that the city is one of the fastest growing environments because of the tech and music industries. It then immediately addresses the blatant history of segregation within the city, noting the trend of POC moving further East as the suburbanization of Austin did not truly occur until the 1970s.

This trend is further explicated when shown the effects of redlining in comparison to health issues throughout the city in 1952 (Huggins, 2017). Redlining, as defined by Huggins, was federally sanctioned to deny services, such as water or electricity, to primarily non-white communities, leading to structural and economic degradation. Districts in East Austin, that are conveniently across the would-be I-35 line to the East, were most affected by issues regarding the lack of running water, lack of private baths, and high concentrations of tuberculosis outbreaks. The lack of health opportunities for these individuals likely also contributed to a lack

of work and mobility opportunities for them in and out of their communities, effectively making the non immediate problems of their communities (i.e voting) moot.

These claims are even more solidified when provided physical maps of population demographic trends within Austin from 1940 until 2010 (Zehr, 2015). As shown below, the blue, pink, and brown on the maps respectively showcase the places that white, Black, and hispanic individuals live in the city, with the red line being indicative of both actual redlining in Austin and I-35. The maps are further supported when acknowledging certain points in history that may have influenced the congregation of POC in certain areas of the city. This is specifically shown in the creation of the physical I-35 Barrier, on top of the former East Avenue, and the “Negro District” on the East side, being the only place Black people were allotted public services and education.



Of course, there are some individuals who don't feel as if this is a valid assertion. Ben Wear, from the Statesman, expresses that I-35 has nothing to do with Austin's past of segregation and has instead actually contributed to the diversification of the city (2012). He supports his claim by exclaiming that the structure of I-35 was created after the process of segregation had

already been occurring for many decades. He does not deny that segregation did happen, but he instead states that integration is occurring now due to the inclusion of I-35 in the Austin landscape.

Gentrification in Austin

Regardless of Wear's point of view, there are still multiple gentrification fronts currently within the city of Austin. An article titled "The Battle of the Blue Cat Café" discusses a significant gentrification front within the city at the Blue Cat Café (Hardy, 2018). The piece includes the surplus of protests surrounding the issues held with the creation of the café by many people in the preexisting community. These protests have only furthered as the café has also come to be multipurpose as the symbol of gentrification and a home-base for those who desire to participate in the gentrification of East Austin.

East Austin is not the only area currently fighting against the furthered gentrification of primarily Black and Brown neighborhoods. Michael King of the Austin Chronicle also highlights the current plans the city has to gentrify the Riverside neighborhood in the South East (2019). He attempts to glorify the efforts of the city to recreate this area to be greener, more traffic efficient, and with updated housing units. Showcasing the support of District 3 council member, Pio Renteria, the article continues to reframe the idea of gentrification to be solely about development. With the exclusion of demonizing protesters, such as Defend Our Hoodz, the article virtually ignores the fact that many POC and low-income individuals live in this space, including many students who cannot afford to live elsewhere within the city limits.

As the process of gentrification of this area occurs, many of these individuals will be displaced, leading many students to no longer be able to attend school within the city of Austin.

There is an added problem with the displacement of students as well as marginalized people as they tend to vote democrat, especially when they hold a multitude of intersecting identities like many in Riverside. With all of this, it is understandable numerous students and faculty members of the University of Texas at Austin have called to action against the gentrification of the Riverside neighborhood, as many are similarly likely to be affected by this issue on a sociopolitical level. In the article written by Way, Mueller, and Wegmann, three professors at the University of Texas at Austin, they identify the numerous flaws of the Riverside project, most importantly emphasizing ways in which the city could properly co-develop spaces with incumbent PoCs and students to ensure the retainment of their spaces (2019).

The issue of voter suppression of students of color is also well highlighted by Michael Wines of the New York Times who found that 9 of the early voting polling locations on Austin Community College (ACC) campuses were closed due to the outlawing of temporary polling locations for early voting within the state of Texas (2019). The article acknowledges that a large number of VOC in general either attend or live near ACC campuses, effectively lowering their overall opportunity to vote. This is well conflated with the fact that POC, specifically Black individuals, disproportionately tend to take advantage of early voting opportunities (ACLU, 2012; Badger, 2014).

When idealizing the situation in their favor, many otherwise liberal individuals will be complicit in gentrification (Cabrera, 2019; Romero, 2018). As identified by Sergio Cabrera in 2019, who studied the reason why many liberal individuals moved into newly gentrified Austin neighborhoods, many of these new residents found that the area was perfect for their lifestyle. Particularly looking into the Mueller neighborhood, situated slightly Northeast of Central Austin,

Cabrera found that convenience, community, and idealism fueled new wave urbanism in this area of the city. Similarly, in 2018, Rachel Romero found street artists in Austin to be moreover ambivalent toward the prospect of gentrification. Even though they identified further urban development with the destruction of the already existing landscape of the city, a linked association had been created between gentrification and street art within Austin. While street art is traditionally symbolized to be a form of resistance, many found the idea of gentrification to provide more space for their art overall.

Gentrification & Voting in Austin

The City of Austin has theoretically made attempts toward remedying the sociopolitical and structural inequities imposed upon POC since before the city existed. Providing services, such as free bus fares on election days and the creation of the 10-ONE district system to further representation of marginalized people, have had positive effects in increasing ideological and descriptive, or face value, euphoria of just over 50% of the electorate. However, the impact of gentrification will come to lessen this effect overtime as more white individuals will begin to concentrate heavily in communities historically owned and maintained by people of color, while the incumbents will be less likely to conserve their space. This trend will eventually lead to a shift in political ideology by the candidates elected, with them ever so slowly straying further from representing those originally living in these districts.

Understanding the Districts

Knowledge of the socioeconomic and racial demographics of the districts is necessary in order to better understand the effects of gentrification on VOC. As provided by the Austin City Council (2019), districts 1 through 4 are most heavily populated by POC, while districts 5

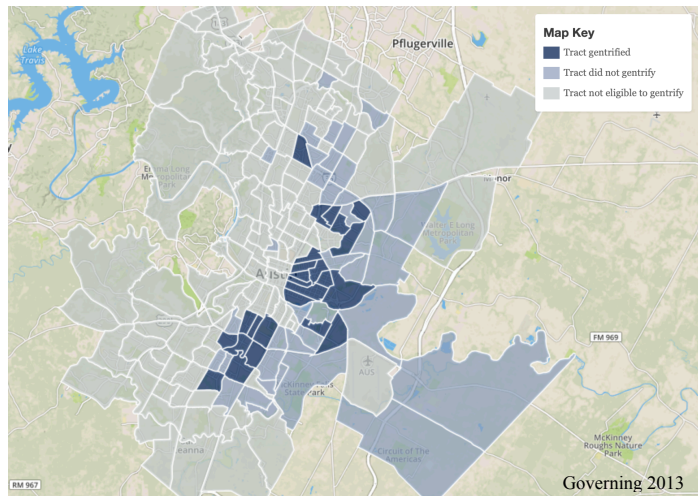
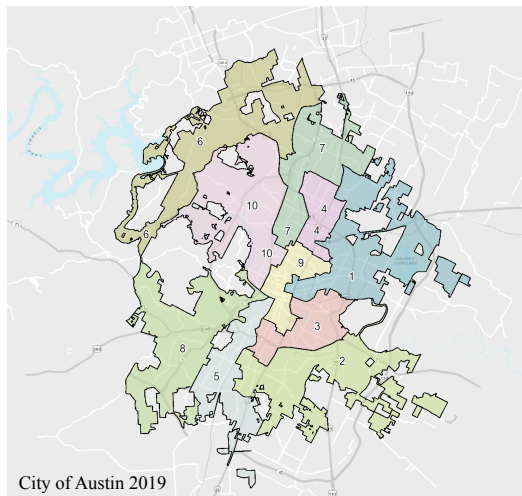
through 10 are mostly populated by white people. Socioeconomically, there is a blatantly disproportionate wage gap between districts of color and white districts, this being a \$30,000 gap between the highest median family income of a district primarily of POC and the lowest median family income of a primarily white district. This inequality is ever more problematic considering the lowest median family incomes are about \$36-39,000 in districts 3 and 4 while the highest median family incomes are 6 figures a year in districts 8 and 10.

Interpreting Polling Locations Vs Gentrification

When simply cross-listing the 68 out of 154 polling locations accessible by bus with district location during the latest election in November of 2019, there seems to be no valid claim of discrimination based upon racial or socioeconomic inequality (Travis County Clerk, 2019; Austin City Council, 2019). Nevertheless, as shown below, it seems as if appearance of these accessible polling locations are positively correlated to gentrification (Governing, 2013). The

District #	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
# of Accessible Polling Locations	7	4	6	8	7	1	6	2	12	8

Travis County Clerk 2019



first figure shows the number of public transportation accessible voter polling locations per district, while the map of the left shows the physical location of each of the 10 districts, and the map on the right identifies the census tracts that have been gentrified versus those which have yet to be gentrified or are not yet qualified for gentrification.

As identified by Capital Metro in 2019 on their Interactive Service Area Map, the Eastern districts tend to disproportionately hold a higher population than job amount within 0.25 miles of each stop. This correlation is most clearly shown on route *350 Airport Boulevard*, which houses about 23,000 individuals, 62.1% of which are minorities, but only has about 10,000 job opportunities, leaving the rest of the individuals to travel elsewhere for work. This, coupled with the 27.3% poverty rate and 10.6% without vehicles, leaves many unable to afford time or money to travel to obtain a voter ID, register to vote, or take time off work to vote on election days. This is vastly different than routes on the West side, such as *491 Allandale*, which holds about 8,670 in population, 22% of which are minorities, and 13,233 job opportunities with only 11% in poverty and 6.7% without vehicles. This trend is not exclusionary: *5 Woodrow/Lamar* and *663 Lake Austin/UT* on the West side as well as *233 Decker/Daffan*, *228 VA Clinic*, *217 Montopolis Feeder*, and many other routes on the East side feature similar dynamics.

While it might be valid to claim that spaces with higher poverty rates tend to be closer to downtown and downtown inherently has more public transportation options, it seems as if districts with census tracts that have experienced gentrification tend to have more accessible polling locations, with the only exception being present in district 10 on the West side of the inner city (Travis County Clerk, 2019; Austin City Council, 2019; Governing, 2013). Districts such as 8, 6, and 2 have little to no gentrification efforts active and thereby lack as many

accessible polling locations as districts such as 9, 4, or 1. Of course, this could easily mean that all of these different forces are interworking together that come to be the system of gentrification in itself. For example, places of higher poverty rates are more likely to be gentrified which would then provide more services like accessible polling locations that would in turn become inaccessible to impoverished individuals as they are driven out of those areas.

Another possible way to perceive this information is that people of color and low-income individuals might inherently come to lessen the effects of voter suppression as marginalized people tend to voice their opinions, requesting for their rights to be honored, and a city might attempt to open the system to more equal access for voting. Such is well understood when examining each platform for the Austin City Council Members. When looking at districts with higher percentages of POC, these being 1-4, the council members most often hold descriptive representation with the majority of their district and highlight their community and affordability in their campaigns (Hasan, 2018; Philpott, 2018). This is even shown in the case of Greg Casar, of district 4, who grew up in Houston, instead of in his district, and still emphasizes community engagement and the work he's done for his district (City of Austin, 2019). Those districts are quite different from all others, where instead their council members emphasized their prior qualifications and current plans for Austin city development as a whole.

Assuming this all to be valid, gentrification would then come to heighten voter suppression in a city as it normally results in the displacement of marginalized people outside of the system of the inner city and in turn eliminates their representation in city office. While the amenities and opportunities for voting would have been heightened up to that point, it would virtually be only utilized by those who already had the opportunity to vote, as the previous

incumbents no longer live in that space. This would thereby lead to the creation of spaces like District 10 where there are 8 accessible polling locations, the median family income is over \$100,000, and over 85% of the population drives by themselves to work. When spaces become fully gentrified, they would then lack as much of a catalyst to change the system of elections to be more accessible for intersectional individuals as there are few who are still the original incumbents of that area.

Conclusion

As identified by William H Frey, even though the white population has nationally been on a decrease, “the recent release of the Census Bureau’s American Community Survey data showed a surprisingly pervasive pattern of white population gains in the nation’s largest cities,” a starkly different trend than just two decades prior where they were staying deep in suburbia (2015). While Frey attributes this current trend to a re-novelization of urban centers coupled with a new generation of youth deciding to move closer to city centers, he still finds it interesting that in some cities there are significant rates of white resurgence in urban centers. However, as white people attempt to move back into city centers, they have been displacing minorities out of the communal spaces they were historically forced into because of cheap costs and high convenience.

This narrative is a little different in Austin as suburbanization did not truly begin until the early 1970s, much later than most other metropolitan cities. Instead, the city was characterized by very strong redlining segregational laws designed to displace and relegate marginalized communities to their current geographical boundaries. Reframed forms of these segregationist tactics, also known as gentrification, have been the more contemporary form of displacement for

these marginalized communities as it revamps locations and heightens the socioeconomic status of these predominantly Black and Brown spaces. Instead of repeating history and continuing to disenfranchise low-income individuals and POC, many ask to be heard and provided more opportunities for their communities to grow with the city and not be destroyed by the efforts of the city.

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